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Fasting as a leftist practice

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Fasting as a leftist practice

Till four years ago, fasting brought to my mind -and to the mind of many of my same-age Greeks, I imagine- the obligatory monthly churchgoing (forced on us by the Greek educational system of the times) and family coercion. Indeed, for many of us that our adolescence coincided with the first post-dictatorship years in Greece (i.e. the mid-seventies), our rejection of fasting was one more sign of our "revolutionary" attitude: we rejected fasting together with other beliefs and practices of the "religious heteronomy" -though later most of us have had a religious marriage ceremony, we baptized our children and became godfathers and godmothers, we took a religious oath etc.

Four years ago I started fasting during the Lent avoiding meat, fish and dairy products, thus without the prescribed strictness, as I found out a year later, since I kept eating oil (on days other than Wednesday and Friday) and drinking wine (these are allowed only on Saturdays and Sundays, and on the Feast of Annunciation and Palm Sunday). Something that makes me wonder, by the way, on how people -like my grandmother who had four children and died 94 years old recently- who obviously used to work more manually than us in the past could keep fasting. (A recent hint: A friend's mother suggested that men who had to cultivate the vineyard could eat oil!)

Quite often I wonder about why I started experimenting with fasting. In my family fasting wasn't really practiced: like most of the Christian orthodox Greeks of those times we avoided meat during the Holy Week and as young boys -my brother and myself- we would fast for three days and take the holy communion a couple of times yearly (basically on Christmas and Easter). My father refused to take the communion -though occasionally he would fast- claiming that his frequent imaginative and often very sexually graphic tirades- made him unworthy of it. Honest admission (given perhaps the more religious familial background: a very religious father and an uncle priest) or clever avoidance? I do not know. (On the other side, my mother told me recently that when as a young girl in the thirties lived for a time in a village and didn't like keeping the weekly fasting on Wednesdays and Fridays, her mother and her friends would tell her that they read in the newspaper that a woman in a nearby village who refused to fast suddenly grew donkey's ears!). I admit that I am not very interested in psycho- or bio- or age-based explanations of my behavior: not only because some of them are quite obvious but also because I do not have the required income to have a psychoanalyst certify my suspicions.. .. Also - friends calm down- I have not joined the so called movement (or fashion) of "new orthodoxy": mostly males -some in the right but some in the left-that find all answers to any conceivable question in the tradition of eastern-Byzantine Greek Christianity. In addition though I am not totally indifferent to the so called "healthy food subculture", I believe I haven't started fasting in compliance with the commands of this particular "alternative" life style. Finally, I am pretty sure I am not searching for my identity, since I can assure you that even now that I am writing this my identification card is in my wallet which I can feel it wright now pressing my right buttock! The only reason I am left with is that -as my mother and many friends claim - I often enjoy an argument for the sake of it, becoming thus a so called spirit of contradiction.. ..

Reflecting on the above, however, while I was taking a walk on the seaside promenade of Heraklion- which after being called "by-pass avenue" might have improved the lung-heart system of some of its habitants (according to their doctors) but it surely medicalized one more aspect of the life of all its inhabitants, namely the carefree walking- munching on the "passa-tempo" seeds that go with the peripatetic reflection I came to formulate the following question: Is it possible to defend fasting according to Greek orthodox religion as a leftist practice for us descendents of the the roman-orthodox (romeo-orthodoxo) cultural blend ("harman")? Here are some of my arguments for it:

1) The capitalistic mode -from its early beginnings but even more today- is based to a great extent on the founding of a universal, homogeneous spime. Namely, wherever it establishes itself, this mode tends to replace the peculiar, indigenous spime with its own abstract, instrumental spime, which additionally it projects as the only «correct» paradigm with respect of which all the rest are defined in a negative way. According to the mode of late capitalism all times and places are appropriate for all activities that in their turn are defined as market activities. The voluntary keeping of the fasting habit -by us the descendants of roman-orthodox (romeo-orthodoxo) cultural blend and it is clear that the same argument applies to similar practices of other cultures, the fasting of other Christian denominations, the Hebraic and Muslim exclusion of pork from their diet, the Hindu vegetarianism etc) -that emphasizes the bodily/experienced distinction of days and seasons, helps in the keeping of the cultural diversity and as a consequence makes more difficult -though by itself can not beat- the inclusion of all the activities in the market.

2) The distinction between fasting and non-fasting foods that brings with itself the practice of fasting is opposed to the reductionism that turns our daily bread into foodstuff, our daily eating in "refueling" and our shiting -daily or not!-into production of city waste comparative to the cancerous industrial waste. In other words, the specific relation fasting establishes with the food prohibits the transformation of the body into another «system of energy any information», the right use of which is known only to the same professionals that usually process the power to enforce their -sold in the market or forced by the state- advices.

3) Fasting is an askesis that cultivates forgotten personal habits, like self-discipline and measured behavior, habits absolutely necessary to a citizen. In our societies of plenty fasting can open a space where one can cultivate solidarity: the weekly Wednesday and Friday fasting can turn into a continuous reminder of our duty to respond to the call of the hungry of this world (obviously this solidarity will not exhaust itself in the practicing of fasting!).

4) Finally, the question of food production has become one of the deepest political problems of our time (one could say that always was). The voluntarily, autonomous, obviously not observant for the non-believers, fasting with the almost 180-days avoidance of food that comes from animals not only restricts the mind-eating consumption of meat that characterizes the so called "society of plenty", but also leads us to a more balanced relation with our surrounding cosmos, as the fasting rules and period are in accordance with the characteristics of the landscape in our corner of the world. Thus, the conscious, voiced, publicly declared adoption of fasting could be a proposal similar to the explicit vegetarian choices of other collectivities that fight against the full incorporation of the feeding circle into the industrial/ capitalist mode.

And since all arguments are based both on imagination and reason, imagine a group of friends around a table, eating their meatless, simple dishes and enjoying them as much as the agreements and disagreements that arise in the course of their discussion (e.g. a woman insists -not unreasonably- that religions and religious practices divide people and poses the question how can she be part of this modern table if she chooses to follow her tradition-jewish cashroot?) while their children (in case they have any) are very happy with the chance of playing "doctor and patients" in another room imagine also the daily, lonely silent fast eating that comes with the notorious modern way of life and all the more frequent Sunday visits of the nuclear families to the fast-food places that demands the younger and more exposed to their TV-proselytizing. Which image you think is nearer to the image of a place where we can seek and practice the Good convivially?